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Editor's Column: On Nurses and Doctors

The article in this issue on the nursing shortage mentions the conflict between doctor and nurse that is an important factor causing nurses to leave the field of nursing. They resent being treated as handmaidens or servants. It is difficult to imagine Florence Nightingale in a tent in the Crimea questioning some doctor's dosage of laudanum or whether or not he should use calomel tea for dysentery. Traditionally the doctor was the unquestioned authority and the nurse was expected to faithfully execute his orders. Traditions like this are a long time changing, but I feel they are changing and that most physicians realize that efficient health care depends on mutual respect and collaboration.

There are certain areas of specialty nursing where the nurse may have more specific technical knowledge than the average physician. The nurses in these areas have generally been gracious enough to allow me to retain my dignity by talking to me as though I understood everything they were saying.

On the other side of the coin, however, there is an occasional nurse who seems bent on establishing an adversary relationship and is skeptical of every diagnosis and treatment. Perhaps this is a by-product of the women's movement because, unfortunately, it seems in our society that to accomplish change one must become strident and harsh and totally polarized. The WSMA and Nurses Association have established an ongoing dialogue, and therein lies the key to the solution of the problem namely hearing the problems on both sides and resolving them together.

I can't help but feel this is more of a problem in hospitals than in an office situation. I know that if my nurse ever questions a decision of mine I simply go in my office, slam the door, and just sit there; and that shows her.

Thinking back on Florence Nightingale, when you consider that she single-handedly established a standard of health care for the British soldier which was non-existent prior to that time and also was responsible for the establishment of nursing as a profession in England, you can be sure she could very easily have questioned the physician's order, but she was just too damned busy working on the health care system.

David Hopkins, M.D.